

Station to Station: Reinventing Practice in the English Language Arts Classroom and Beyond

"To create new classroom communities, learners and teachers must question [the] curriculum and find ways to adapt it to the needs of individual classrooms and learners. ... [A]ny kind of transformation must begin within—must begin in the classroom with teachers observing what students know and what they need to know, and observing themselves as knowers and learners as well."

from An Unquiet Pedagogy:
Transforming Practice in the
English Classroom

by Eleanor Kutz and
Hephzibah Roskelly

*"Here are we, one magical moment, such is
the stuff*

From where dreams are woven

*Bending sound, dredging the ocean, lost in
[our] circle."*

from "Station to Station"
by David Bowie

Introduction

If teachers are to transform their pedagogy so that teacher and student become more visible and accessible to one another, then we must create opportunities in which learners' voices, in all of their complexities and contradictions, can be heard—not only to acknowledge them, but also to listen to and learn from them. Students must be invited to participate in the conversation, to engage in a dialectic in which they become contributing authors of a world-in-the-making. Such opportunities occur when teachers create viable spaces in the classroom where they and their students choose to become readers and writers of their worlds together. As we see it, the use of learning stations provides teachers and students a unique opportunity to implement and experience group work in an innovative and "unquiet" way (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991).

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Borrowing from Bowie's vision, the learning stations strategy encourages students to *bend* their conception of learning, *weave* their own lives together with the lives of others, and ultimately to *lose* themselves in the *circle* of experience, inquiry, and content—all of which contribute to a "dance of disruption" in terms of the traditional classroom. Whether you refer to them as learning stations or learning centers, this particular instructional strategy is not new, originating in the world of primary education and evolving out of an emphasis on having students construct their own learning. However, its potential for making learning more active and experiential at the secondary level has rarely been tapped. As Milner and Milner (1999) point out, learning stations have the potential to "make learning more social and collaborative; at other times, they make it more personal and reflective" (369). Cycling through the interactive circle of learning stations allows students to simultaneously experience a variety of student-centered and self-directed educational challenges. Presented here are three examples of how we have successfully used learning stations with our own students as means of reseeing the old and reinventing practice. First, I reveal how the strategy can be reconceptualized to facilitate inquiry-based learning as a cycle of inquiry (Short and Harste, 1996), emphasizing process and product in the context of a thematic unit. Next, Beth describes how learning stations can enliven the teaching of two literary classics.

Connections to Inquiry

Beth actually re-introduced me to the notion of learning stations while I was serving as her University Supervisor during her student teaching associateship about four years

ago. Before that, I had vague memories of moving from station to station to learn about the planets while in elementary school. At the time I observed Beth using learning stations with the teaching of a novel at the high school level, I had just started to teach an off-grounds Masters Course in Writing Across the Curriculum—a course for teachers already in the field at all grade levels and in all subject areas—and I knew that I wanted to address inquiry-based writing with these teachers as a part of the course. Ken Macrorie's I-Search strategy (Macrorie, 1988) provided one means of inquiry-based learning for individual students, but I also wanted a way to approach group inquiry as well. Beth's teaching, in effect, served as a catalyst for my reconceptualization of the learning stations strategy to facilitate inquiry-based learning.

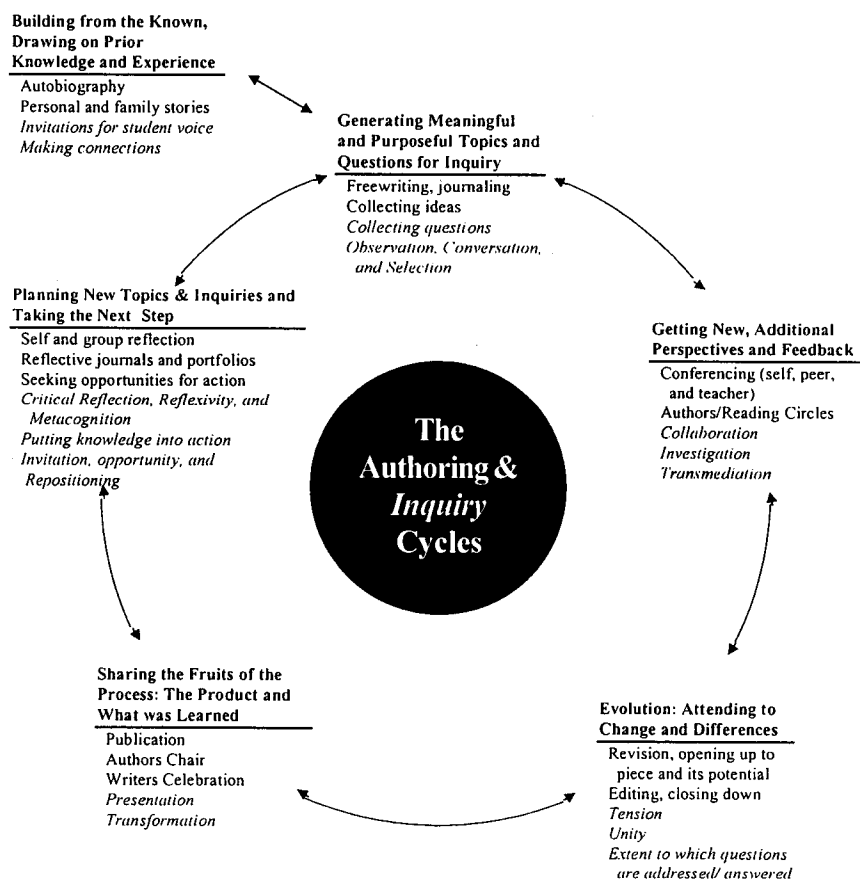
with the inquiry cycle, as described by Kathy Short and Jerome Harste (1996) in their book *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers*. Learning stations provided a means of bringing content full circle with process and of demonstrating how a thematic unit can be motivated at a variety of grade levels.

To make that connection a little more explicit, I'd first like to discuss Short and Harste's notion of the inquiry cycle. For them, inquiry serves as the metaphor for education—for the way we learn and, as such, they provide a curricular framework for inquiry-based learning that actually mirrors the writing process. Figure 1 provides insight into my understanding of how the authors relate inquiry and writing as similar processes or cycles.

I began to see ways to wed the learning stations strategy

Figure 1: The Authoring and Inquiry Cycles

[Note: adapted from Short and Harste (1996)]



Here, the stages of the authoring cycle are shown to parallel the processes of inquiry, starting with the notion of building from the known or beginning with what it is that students already bring with them to the classroom in terms of knowledge and experience. The next step is to generate questions for inquiry, motivating interests or discontents that will inspire a search for answers. Working with a group allows students to pose and refine questions, to shape and construct good questions for inquiry. New perspectives, deeper and more critical, are gained through this type of collaboration, and students also learn how to attend to and negotiate differences through the inquiry process. They share what they learned and are able to use this newfound knowledge as a platform for planning new forays into inquiry, opportunities that provide the terms for thoughtful, more informed new action.

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This inquiry cycle mirrors the recursive nature of the writing process (see Fig. 2)—prewriting, drafting, rewriting, editing, and publication—and how revision is incorporated at each stage. It also reiterates the important concept that the writing process is not a linear progression but, instead, a cycle that allows for progress through the process of going back and forth between these various steps.

Figure 2: The Stages of the Writing Process

PRE-WRITING (Invention; Generating ideas)

- Conferencing / Feedback

DRAFTING (Organizing ideas into a draft; Writing)

- Conferencing / Feedback

REVISION (Exploring the possibilities of a draft and the content; staying open to them)

- Conferencing / Feedback

EDITING (Tightening a piece; Closing down on it with a focus on mechanics)

- Conferencing / Feedback

PUBLICATION (Sharing a final, polished piece with an audience)

- Conferencing / Feedback

In considering these two processes, I began to see a direct application for learning stations with the inquiry cycle—how the strategy could facilitate the inquiry cycle in the classroom in dynamic ways. Beth had shown me

how the study of literature could be made much more dynamic for students through the use of the strategy, so I created a scenario for my Writing Across the Curriculum students in which they would actually experience not only

the magic of learning stations, but *the dance of disruption* inspired by group inquiry.

Stationing Inquiry: What Can You Tell Me About... Elephants?!

Given the diversity of the Writing Across the Curriculum students—teachers from all grade levels (pre-K to community college) and subject areas (math to science to foreign language to home economics and all of the other typical and not so typical subjects like nursing and radiology), I knew that I would have to choose a topic almost at random for focused study—something general enough to make the point that the strategy could work in any subject area and that the learning stations strategy could bring to life our natural tendencies towards curiosity regardless of the topic. As a preface to the course, I always tell the teachers that they are the experts for their particular grade level and content area and that their responsibility will be to reinvent any and all strategies presented for their particular unique contexts. So with this in mind, we began our own focused inquiry on the topic of elephants! Yes, *elephants*, who, as John Donne so elegantly put it, are “Nature’s great masterpiece.”

The first step in our simulated inquiry experience, “building from the known,” begins with sharing what it is we already know or think we know about elephants as a means of building upon that information through further inquiry. Students brainstorm aloud any facts, memories, dreams, reflections, experiences, or associations related to the topic of elephants. As they share, I write these on the board. Inevitably there are some discrepancies here in what students think they know and what they definitely know that provide a good segue into the next step, thus serving as one of the “initiating events” or catalysts for the group inquiry.

Next, students create a list of initial questions. I have students free write or brainstorm at least three possible good questions about elephants that they would like answers to and write them down. Part of our previous course work has included a discussion of what makes a *good* question (e.g., makes one think deeply, generates additional questions, challenges, requires multiple sources for answers, is something a person genuinely wants to know, is something one genuinely does not already have an answer for, is not easily answered, etc.). Students take

these initial questions with them into a group setting as a means of focusing their inquiry even more before they begin their search for answers.

For this inquiry activity, six learning stations are set up in and around the classroom, so I break the students up into six groups. Before they begin their work at the stations, they first share their individual questions and then come up with at least three that they will pursue as a group. They are provided with directions and an adapted I-Chart (see Figure 3), a device for organizing their “dance” through the stations. Students are also provided with directions on a handout which explains the inquiry process that they are about to undergo in their groups.

The directions explain that when the activity begins, each group rotates through each station completing the assigned activity found there and making notes in their elephant search I-Chart (Fig. 3). They start at the station of their group number (decided when they counted off by sixes). Before the activity begins, each group decides on the role for their members, including a *Recorder* to take notes for their group, a *Leader* who keeps them focused and on task, a *Time-Keeper* to keep them on schedule (as they only have 15 minutes at each station), a *Guide* to get them to the next station on time after time has been called for them to switch groups, and a *Closer* who makes sure that the station they depart from is left better than they found it. [Note: The roles may need to be adjusted depending on the size of the groups—sometimes, students will take on more than one role. The number of stations you create might also affect group sizes.] The goal is for students to seek answers to their questions, collect information relevant to their interests, and record any new questions that come up for them during the process.

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Again, the I-Chart (Fig. 3) provides a visual tool for students to use to collect and organize their research efforts. Students are provided directions for using this tool, and

Figure 3: I-Chart

S t a t i o n s ↓	Topic:	Guiding Questions			Other Interesting Facts & Figures ↓	New Questions ↓
		1.	2.	3.		
	What We → Know					
	Summary →					

Sources {

they have also read the article, "Critical Reading/Thinking Across the Curriculum: Using I-Charts to Support Learning," from which this particular I-Chart is adapted (Hoffman, 1992). As Figure 3 shows, students list their topic in the box in the upper right of the page. They list their group's three guiding questions in the top row boxes numbered one to three. In the "What we know" row, they write their group's preliminary, tentative answers to each question—what they know or hypothesize initially. As they visit each station, they consult the provided resources to help answer their questions. They are also encouraged to write down the names of the sources in the shaded box to the left that corresponds with the station where they found the information. They write their answers underneath the corresponding questions, and they list any new interesting facts and information they learn as well as any new questions that arise for their group.

As each group moves from station to station, I circulate, answer questions, and keep time for the whole group—15 minutes per station. Each station is set up in different parts of the room, and sometimes I use more than one classroom, especially for the web questing station. The locations of the stations are designated by large numbers posted on the walls, and each station has a folder with explicit directions along with supplemental materials and artifacts where applicable. Students record their findings and new questions in their I-Charts as they circulate.

Elephant Inquiry Learning Stations

Station 1 – Web Questing: As students begin their quest for enlightenment about "nature's great masterpiece," they use the WWW in a computer lab or classroom to visit predetermined web sites and collect information (e.g., The Elephant Sanctuary, Tembe Elephant Park, National Zoo, etc). Depending on the computer resources available, the group members may work individually, in pairs, or as a group. To make the process more efficient, I usually have the first group at this station bookmark these sites if I haven't done this myself in advance.

Station 2 - "Just the facts, Ma'am": This station involves students browsing through a set of nonfiction materials (e.g., encyclopedia articles, annotated pictures and graphics, adult and children's books about elephants, etc.) to collect information. Because of the large quantity of non-fiction resources and information to choose from here,

students are encouraged to divide the materials up among the group.

Station 3 - Art, Ads, and Entertainment: Here, students peruse artwork and artifacts in order to glean additional information about elephants. Sources include advertisements featuring elephants in a variety of ways, photographs, pictures of an African elephant mask, carved wooden elephants, a small elephant statue from Turkey, various prints and overheads of artwork (i.e., paintings featuring elephants). There are also articles on elephants who paint, including details on how well their creations sell, as well as an article on elephants who make music, explaining how a couple of American composers have actually recorded and released a CD of a Thai elephant orchestra that they helped organize.

Station 4 - Video Killed the Radio Star: Here, students are prompted to consider the following question: "If you were an elephant, would you trust your well-being to humans?" They view a short video presentation about elephants. While I have collected several, the one I use most often is an NBC news clip on elephant contraception—a humane means of controlling the excessive elephant population in some parts of South Africa.

Station 5 – Literary Circle: At this station, students read aloud three versions of the famous "The Blind Man and the Elephant" story and then compare and contrast them. In addition to searching for answers to their questions and new information, students are encouraged to generate personal interpretations of the story versions and their larger meanings. In effect, they are trying to make meaning of the story's message and how it relates to our perceptions of elephants and the notion of perception in general. Students are prompted to consider the metaphorical nature of the story. They read John Godfrey Saxe's version of the Native American legend, "The Blind Men and the Elephant," a poem by Rumi entitled "Elephant in the Dark," and a children's story version retold by author Karen Backstein.

Station 6 - "Word Up!" Origin, Definition, Myth, Metaphor, Symbols, Meanings, and Quotations: Here, students explore materials to discern the origins and myths of the word and the animal, and how the word and image are used as symbols in different ways. Students examine a variety of word origins, quotes, articles, political cartoons,

and images at this station. One of the station artifacts includes an article entitled "Learning About Boys from Elephants," in which *Washington Post* columnist William Rasberry draws a compelling parallel between young bull elephants who lose their fathers in the wild and inner city youth who lose their fathers at an early age—both sets of children suffer dire consequences.

Once the groups have circulated through the stations, we reconvene and discuss their findings. First, group leaders share two items with the whole class: 1) a brief report on their group's success in answering their questions; and 2) one of their new questions which they decide upon together as something they would be interested in pursuing further. I write these new questions on the board or on an overhead.

At this point, the teachers move out of the role of student as we begin to discuss options for how they might proceed from this point with their own students. For example, they could focus and pursue the search in various ways given these new questions: the class could decide on one question from the board to pursue further together or each small group could choose to pursue answers to

Figure 4: Putting Knowledge into Action

Model Acrostic Poem:

Emotional creatures sharing grief and happiness
Lumbering giants communicating in low rumbles
Existing in a matriarchal society
Poaching for ivory is banned
Human-like characteristics
Affectionate nature
Will **N**ever forget because of their intelligence
Two tons of tush, tusk, and trunks
So like humans—smart, sensitive beings.

—Virginia Beach Cohort, Spring 2001

Model A, B, C Poem:

ELEPHANT ABC

tempted by a lcohol	n ostalgic
big b lubbery beast	o uch! you stepped on my toe!
c alf cuddles with the cow	p layful
d epressed	u nique
e motional	r ough skin
f amily oriented	s ensitive
g rief	t remendous thundering
	treaders of water
h elpful, hungry herbivore	u nforgettable
i rrepressible feelings	v iolent
j oy	w et, wild, white and weighs
	a lot
bigger than an e lk	e xtra large
l oyal	cares for the y oung
m atriarchal	z oo favorite

—Lynchburg Cohort, Fall 1999

their own question or each student could choose to pursue a question of their choice as an individual search. Based on grade level and content area, the inquiry-based learning stations strategy might also occur over a longer period of time—perhaps more time at each station and/or spreading the station work out over several class periods. The learning station strategy allows the teacher flexibility depending on her goals and purposes. Next, teachers are invited and encouraged to reflect upon their brief experience and to provide their own insights and ideas for how they might use, reinvent, and adapt the strategy in their own classroom settings. In this part of the course, they are always enthusiastic about the strategy itself as well as the ideas they have for bringing it to life and its potential for engaging their students. As a conclusion to the activity, we create either a class acrostic poem or A, B, C poem or story in which the groups apply the knowledge they've gained as a part of their inquiry (see Figure 4). While somewhat whimsical for a group of teachers, the experience leads into a final discussion of the importance of making that vital connection between process and content, between gathering information, putting it into action and applying it. The product created as a result of the inquiry experience then becomes an artifact of the knowledge gained and evidence of the student being able to put that knowledge into action.

Using Learning Stations with Literature: A Novel Approach to "Stationing" *The Scarlet Letter* and *Beowulf*

Milner and Milner (1999) provide a clear sense of the structure and organization of learning stations as well as pointing out the potential benefits of this instructional strategy with regard to having students construct their own learning. Using learning stations for literature study creates and promotes a student-centered, cooperative-learning atmosphere in which several topics can be scrutinized and experienced while each student contributes, discusses, composes, and thinks. Beginning with a common subject, a literary text in this case, students are encouraged to build upon what they know and create links between the word and the world, helping to make the literary canon more relevant. While my interest in learning stations relates to employing this strategy as a tool for facilitating inquiry-based learning, Beth provides examples of how learning stations can be implemented to further enhance the understanding of two commonly read literary classics.

Using learning stations for literature study creates and promotes a student-centered, cooperative-learning atmosphere in which several topics can be scrutinized and experienced while each student contributes, discusses, composes, and thinks.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and the Old English epic, *Beowulf*, are standard fare in most high school literature curricula. One way to explore some of the major issues and themes in these works would be to incorporate literature-based learning stations. The intent with this strategy is to reinvent the typical lecture/discussion format of talking about the novel so that it becomes more of an active, meaning-making process, one in which students forge connections between these classics and other texts, their own lives, and the outside world. A synopsis of the five learning stations Beth created for each classic follows. Over a two-day period in her blocked eleventh- and ninth-grade English classes, students

worked in small groups to complete their cycle through the stations, spending approximately twenty minutes at each one. As students completed work at each station, they filed it in their writing portfolios which were submitted for a grade at the conclusion of the activity.

Learning Stations for Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

Station 1 - "The Devil Inside": Given the societal standards of the historical setting of Hawthorne's novel, at this station students are pushed to explore some of the religious threads woven throughout the work. They are also encouraged to explore Puritanical ethics and beliefs and the extent to which the devil in Hawthorne's novel influences characters. After discussing three characters in terms of Puritanical morality, students listen to the song "The Devil Inside" by INXS and analyze the lyrics as a means of preparing to compose a response in which they speculate about the devil's role in the lives of the characters from the novel. The song asserts that "every single one of us [has] the devil inside" but implies that not everyone acts on this supposed internal influence. Students are challenged to not only interpret the song's meaning but to apply the proposed theory therein to the Puritan world of Hawthorne's novel. Students leave this station with a written explanation of their analysis and quotations from the text in support.

Station 2 - Interrogative Reading: Since beginning *The Scarlet Letter*, students have been interacting with the novel by composing questions as they read. At this station, students become facilitators and responders as they share and respond to questions they have been generating as a part of their individual reader response to the novel. Within their small group of five or six students, students pair up or work as a trio in sharing, refining, generating, and answering questions related to their reading and comprehension of *The Scarlet Letter*. The process begins with students exchanging their questions with one another and reading them in an effort to try and find answers together. Through a focused dialogue, students speculate about possible answers, discuss which questions they value the most, look for convergences in their lines of questioning, and look more critically at Hawthorne's story. This station empowers students to make use of their own questions while getting them to

question their questions as well. Topics vary, including questions of basic plot structure, analysis, judgment, and hypothesis. Setting their own pace and agenda, students take notes as they discuss the focus questions.

As the culminating activity at this station, students contribute to a bank of questions for an archive. As a pair or trio, they write down on note cards two or more of their more insightful revised questions to leave in a file box at the station. As new groups begin working at this station, they are also encouraged to look at the questions of the groups who preceded them. Finally, students are asked to write a short reflection piece in which they explain how they worked with their partners to answer the student-generated and teacher-generated questions and what this process yielded for them.

Station 3 - "Solitude": After reading Ella Wheeler Wilcox's "Solitude," a poem in which the author contemplates life in terms of the pleasure of company and death as the solitude we all have to face alone, students discuss the relationship between Hester's world and their own. Students examine the role that the Puritan society plays in *The Scarlet Letter* and then compose a diary entry in the voice of one of the characters. Next, students discuss the social situation and ethical standards in modern day America. Using Wilcox's poem and the novel as catalysts, students decide whether or not Hester's world relates to their own world. Each student then composes a second journal entry, this time writing in their own voice, from their own point of view. Both of the diary entries become a part of the students' writing portfolios.

Station 4 - Current Events: In an effort to forge connections between the novel and contemporary American society, this station provides students with the opportunity to interact with relevant artifacts of contemporary culture. Such as articles and cartoons from magazines and newspapers. Students are asked to relate the significance of one or more of these artifacts to the novel and, in turn, to explain how the events, characters, and themes of *The Scarlet Letter* relate to our present day society as evidenced in these artifacts. Students compose an analysis of the artifact as well as a description of the artifact's connection to the word/world of the novel and the world in which we live. Again, these short pieces are added to the students' writing portfolios.

Students are asked to relate the significance of one or more of these artifacts to the novel and, in turn, to explain how the events, characters, and themes of *The Scarlet Letter* relate to our present day society as evidenced in these artifacts.

Station 5 - Text Work: This station requires students to research a specific question using the text of the novel. Students gain the practice of supporting their ideas and answers with specific textual references, thereby developing the necessary skill of strengthening their written arguments while becoming more comfortable with using the text as a tool to formulate initial forays into literary criticism. The prompt asks students to contemplate Pearl's role in the novel.

Before composing the essay, students are encouraged to pre-write and organize their thoughts by generating a thesis statement or argument. Students are cued to brainstorm three main points that they will use to support their thesis. Then to support the argument, they find, quote, and cite textual evidence to support their main points. As students weigh the balance of Pearl's normality, they lay the groundwork for the writing process for a more in-depth literary analysis essay as a part of the overall unit on the novel.

Learning Stations for *Beowulf*

Station 1 - Composing Alliterative Verse: Playing with language is the errand for students while at this learning station. After discussing the aspects of alliterative verse in class, students read three lines from Seamus Heaney's recent translation. Analyzing and discussing the devices used (e.g., repeated consonant and vowel sounds, caesuras, and kennings), students apply their knowledge of alliterative verse by composing a group poem about English class. They are welcome to be silly, to have fun, and to work as a group. These *Beowulf*-inspired pieces are shared aloud after students have visited each learning station.

Station 2 - The Image of the Monster: While at this station, students are encouraged to connect the written and the visual as they investigate how characters' attributes would be depicted, both literally and metaphorically, on paper and in three dimensions. In a previous class, students created visual images of Grendel. After brainstorming a list of adjectives and character traits belonging to the monster, they choose an image of the monster (from a pile of student-produced pictures) which best exemplifies their ideas. Next, students compose a short paragraph about why they chose the selected image. Then, using a ball of clay, students shape a three-dimensional representation of one of the other characters in the story. Their shapes should be literal and metaphorical, life-like and interpretive. After shaping the characters, students explain their figures, noting both artistic and symbolic features.

Station 3 - Point of View: Having discussed the importance of perspective earlier in the year, students at this station analyze how plot is influenced by point of view. Each student receives an excerpt from John Gardner's *Grendel*. With all group members following along as one student reads aloud, students think about how the tale of Beowulf differs when told by Grendel. After reading and discussing, students compose a narrative segment of the Anglo-Saxon epic through the eyes of another character. Selecting one episode from the tale to revisit, students compose and then share their creations, discussing the significance of point of view.

Station 4 - The Braggadocio Beot: In an attempt to bring *Beowulf* into the present, at this station students look keenly at several images of athletes, world leaders, and popular culture figures. After discussing the boasting in Beowulf and its purposes, students analyze the role of bragging in their own culture. Identifying the people in the photographs, defining their roles, and discussing how they talk about themselves leads students to questions of evaluation and judgment; essentially, they must decide if boasting is a tool, an impediment, or both. Next, turning to the discussion between Unferth and Beowulf in the text, students discuss why boasting was necessary and then compare the situation to the modern day examples. Seeking connections between the text and their lives, they compose a paragraph of their findings.

In an attempt to bring *Beowulf* into the present, at this station students look keenly at several images of athletes, world leaders, and popular culture figures.

Station 5 - A Study in Translation: Encouraging students to analyze the importance of translation, they will read a selected passage from the text aloud. Next, each will read the same segment from Seamus Heaney's newer translation. (Copies are provided at the station.) Paying close attention to diction and figurative language, students will draw comparisons and contrasts between the two translations. Carefully looking for examples of alliterative verse and kennings in both, students will seek slight differences in tone and intensity. After discussing their findings, students will analyze the importance of translation using textual evidence from the two versions of Beowulf. They will compose a paragraph stating their findings.

Written work from each station is evaluated as part of a writing portfolio collected upon class completion of the learning station activities.

Conclusion

Our hope with this article is to provide some ideas for reinventing the learning stations strategy based on our success in using it ourselves (and, in my case, the success of the teachers with whom I've worked who have used it as well). Ideally, Beth and I would have you circulating through our stations to get a fuller sense of the experience, but print does not, of course, allow for that. While the station outlines provided cannot substitute for the experiential nature of the learning stations strategy, we hope that you are able to get a sense of the success we have had with it and the potential worth it might have for you and your own students. As always, the real power of reinvention rests with you, the classroom teacher. We provide our examples not as blueprints for success, but as a means for inspiring you to think about how the magic of learning stations could be cast differently from your point of view, from the unique venue in which you are creating your own *dance of disruption*.

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